



Journal of Southeast Asian American
Education and Advancement

Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement

Volume 8 | Issue 1

Article 6

2013

Book Review: War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work, by Cathy J. Schlund-Vials

Quan Tue Tran
Yale University, quan.tran@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/jsaaea>

Recommended Citation

Tran, Quan Tue (2013) "Book Review: War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work, by Cathy J. Schlund-Vials," *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

DOI: 10.7771/2153-8999.1061

Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/jsaaea/vol8/iss1/6>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries.
Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



Volume 8 (2013)

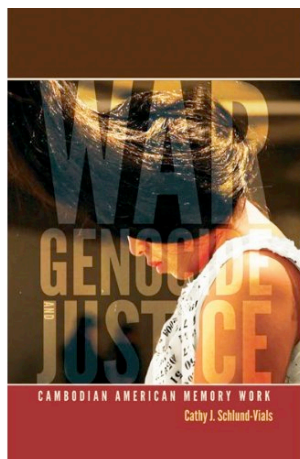
Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement

www.JSAAEA.org

A peer-reviewed
scholarly journal
published by the
National Association
for the Education &
Advancement of
Cambodian, Laotian,
and Vietnamese
Americans (NAFEA)

Schlund-Vials, Cathy. (2012). *War, genocide, and justice: Cambodian American memory work*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 264 pp. \$22.50 (Paperback). ISBN 978-0-8166-7097-0.

Reviewed by
Quan Tue Tran
Yale University



Nearly four decades after the Khmer Rouge seized control of Phnom Penh and executed the genocidal policy that killed an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians (1975-1979), it is timely to ask: How and why do Cambodians and Cambodian Americans remember and forget the genocide? What is at stake in their diverse engagement with this genocidal past? Cathy Schlund-Vials tackles these questions with depth, urgency, and theoretical nuance in *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work*. Through an effective comparative approach, the author juxtaposes dominant cultural narratives about the Cambodian genocide with the multilayer “memory work” of 1.5-generation Cambodian American cultural producers. She convincingly argues that in light of inadequate and amnesiac state-sanctioned narratives about the Khmer Rouge era, Cambodian American

filmmakers, writers, musicians, and performance artists generate alternative sites for justice, healing, and reclamation through their labor. More specifically, she shows that by engaging genocidal past through documenting survivor testimonials, personalized narratives, and familial genealogies, Cambodian American “remembrance activists” assert cultural citizenship claims in both Cambodia and the United States. Their politicized, intergenerational, and transnational efforts offer rich platforms to explore the agency of survivors, questions of war and genocidal justice, and the politics of memory.

Comprising of four engaging chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue, *War, Genocide, and Justice* draws on an impressive and unexamined archive of Cambodian American cultural production that privileges the perspectives of genocide survivors. The book begins by confronting the “Cambodian Syndrome,” which Schlund-Vials defines as “a transnational set of amnesiac politics” that “encompasses the paradoxical nonadmission of U.S. culpability before, during, and after the Democratic Kampuchean era” (p. 13). The current Cambodian government’s selective remembering and strategic forgetting of the crimes committed by the



SOME RIGHTS RESERVED Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and the **Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement**, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or JSAAEA.

Khmer Rouge also exacerbates this syndrome. For example, the author argues in Chapter 1 that because the Vietnamese occupying army (1979-89) rehabilitated and curated sites like Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and Ek Center for Genocide Crimes for the purpose of legitimizing Vietnamese military presence in the nascent People's Republic of Kampuchea, these iconic places essentially reproduce a master narrative of Vietnamese liberation rather than providing meaningful spaces for collective remembrance and reconciliation on Cambodian terms. Such sites are additionally problematic because they emphasize the perpetrators' atrocities at the expense of the victims, whose skeletal remains are displayed indefinitely as criminal evidence and deprived of proper and culturally sensitive burials. Moreover, as these sites become renowned international atrocity tourism destinations, they perpetuate and commodify the victims' miseries.

Moving beyond the built memorials in Cambodia, Schlund-Vials turns to cinematic memory of the Khmer Rouge era by analyzing the historical drama *The Killing Fields* (directed by Roland Joffé, 1984) alongside Socheata Poouv's autobiographical documentary *New Year Baby* (2006) in Chapter 2. Interpreting *The Killing Fields*, which is based on American journalist Sydney Schanberg's *The Death and Life of Dith Pran*, as an apologetic and redemptive narrative, she points out that the film's preoccupation with American moral qualms associated with U.S. foreign policies in Southeast Asia serves the pursuit of American atonement rather than genocide survivors' search for justice and reconciliation. In contrast, Schlund-Vials asserts that *New Year Baby*—an autobiographical film that documents the filmmaker's and her family's quest for truth and closure—engenders a powerful and intimate remembrance effort that privileges survivors' desire for justice, reconciliation, and reclamation. As the intergenerational, affective, and familial registers of remembrance that permeate in *New Year Baby* confront family secrets and connect family members, they also illuminate the impacts of Khmer-Rouge-era biopolitics and necropolitics. Such dimensions of Khmer Rouge violence are often overlooked in dominant narratives about this era.

Further exploring survivor remembrance through literary production, Schlund-Vials examines the memoirs of Cambodian Americans Loung Ung and Chanrithy Him in Chapter 3. Published in 2000, Loung's *First They Killed My Father* and Him's *When Broken Glass Floats* both focus on the female writers' childhood memories of life in Cambodia before and during the Khmer Rouge reign. Schlund-Vials reads these narratives not as a kind of bildungsroman that the memoir genre often beckons, but as "evidentiary texts." She argues that they both embody a collective juridical agenda of survivors who saw their responsibility as bearing witness not only to the Khmer Rouge crimes, but also to the destructive impacts of U.S. military involvement in Cambodia during the Vietnam War era. Furthermore, by attending to class, ethnic, and gender tensions apparent in these memoirs, Schlund-Vials also shows both the similarity and diversity of these texts' remembrance agendas. Ending the chapter with the controversies over issues of authorship in *When Broken Glass Floats* and veracity in *First They Killed My Father*, Schlund-Vials maintains that although Loung's and Him's memoirs may be "less stable authentic narratives," these works are still valuable "as qualified memorials to the Cambodian genocide and as conflicted monuments to a still-forming Cambodian American selfhood" (p. 147).

The articulation of Cambodian American selfhood and genocide remembrance also manifests through music, which is the site of inquiry in the fourth chapter. Analyzing rapper praCh Ly's provocative *Dalama* trilogy, Schlund-Vials attends to both the cultural and political interventions that the Southern-California-based Cambodian American musician generates. Closely examining the content and hybrid musical forms that make up praCh's multi-volume and

bilingual “hip hop memoir,” the author argues that the *Dalama* trilogy delivers a distinct Cambodian American critique against the matrix of forgetting that Killing Fields survivors have to navigate and confront both in the United States and in Cambodia. She shows that by combining collected survivor oral histories, traditional Cambodian music forms (e.g. pin peat), and socially conscious American hip hop genre, praCh produces a hybrid site of genocidal remembrance that resonates with both old and young Cambodians/Cambodian Americans. Such resonance exemplifies the transnational and intergenerational significance of his multivalent memory labor. In addition, praCh’s “capacious” and “interdisciplinary” music also reveals the deep-seated connections between past and present U.S. foreign policies in Cambodia, Khmer Rouge authoritarianism, refugee experiences, elusive genocide justice, contemporary Cambodian politics, and present-day Cambodian American deportations.

War, Genocide, and Justice concludes with close readings of poet/performer/visual artist Anida Yoeu Ali’s work. Focusing specifically on Ali’s poem, *Visiting Loss*, and her bodily installation, *Palimpsest for Generation 1.5*, Schlund-Vials highlights the lyrical and embodied memory labor of the self-described 1.5 Cambodian American Muslim transnational. As the author puts it, Ali’s poetic and bodily articulations of loss simultaneously “memorialize the passing of family members, homelands, and childhoods to instantiate juridical claims of profound communal injury in need of recognition and justice” and “monumentalize survivor remembrance and recuperates refugee selfhood” (pp. 186-187). The same assessment could be extended to the Cambodian American memory work that the book previously mentioned.

The juridical stake and the resistance against state-authorized forgetting that *War, Genocide, and Justice* foregrounds renders this book a timely and substantial contribution to multiple fields of inquiry. In particular, students of Cambodian studies, Asian American/Cambodian American studies, American Studies, Southeast Asian diasporic studies, genocide studies, and memory studies have much to gain from the author’s deep and sustained theoretical engagement with the politics of genocide memory, transnational identity formation, and Cambodian American cultural production. The diverse forms, sites, and actors of genocide remembrance also enliven this book. The clarity of the arguments further makes this accessible to both undergraduate and graduate audiences.

War, Genocide, and Justice and the memory work that it examines prove more relevant than ever in light of the recent death of Khmer Rouge leader Ieng Sary in the midst of the ongoing UN-backed genocide tribunal in Cambodia in 2013. While the termination of the trial against Ieng Sary upon his death reveals yet again the limits of state-authorized juridical engagements with genocide past, the cultural works that Schlund-Vials documents and analyzes powerfully remind readers that survivors and subsequent generations continue to demand for justice and reconciliation beyond state-sanctioned parameters. Like the compelling Cambodian American cultural works that it investigates, this book confronts the Cambodian Syndrome and refuses to yield the final say on the questions of genocide justice and survival to the nation-state, international power, and dominant narratives that privilege the nation-state’s agendas and the perpetrators.

About the Reviewer

Quan Tue Tran is a Ph.D. candidate in American Studies at Yale University. Her dissertation, "Anchoring Boat People History and Memory: Dimensions of Refugee Identity, Community, and Knowledge Production in the Vietnamese Diaspora," examines transnational processes of memory and history making in the contemporary Vietnamese refugee diaspora by documenting and analyzing boat refugee burial sites, memorials, archives, and pilgrimages in Southeast Asia, Western Europe, and North America. Her teaching and research interests include Asian American studies, diaspora studies, transnationalism, history and memory. In 2013-2014, she will be a pre-doctoral fellow at the Asian American Studies Institute at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. Her published writings can be found in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, at www.damau.org, and in *Troubling Borders: An Anthology of Art and Literature by Southeast Asian Women in the Diaspora*.



Volume 8 (2013)

Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement

www.JSAAEA.org

A peer-reviewed
scholarly journal
published by the
National Association
for the Education &
Advancement of
Cambodian, Laotian,
and Vietnamese
Americans (NAFEA)

Editor

Dr. Wayne E. Wright

University of Texas, San Antonio

Associate Editors

Dr. Chhany Sak-Humphry

University of Hawaii at Manoa

Dr. Phitsamay Sychitkokhong Uy

University of Massachusetts, Lowell

Book Review Editor

Dr. Vichet Chhuon

University of Minnesota

Creative Works Editor

Bryan Thao Worra

Lao Assistance Center

Special Advisor

Gregory Green

Curator, Echols Collection on Southeast Asia, Cornell University Library

Journal Manager

Sovicheth Boun

University of Texas, San Antonio

Comments and questions for the editorial staff may be directed to jsaaea@lists.sis.utsa.edu

Editorial Review Board

Dr. Steve Arounsack

California State University, Stanislaus

Dr. Phala Chea

Lowell Public Schools

Dr. Loan Dao

University of Massachusetts, Boston

Dr. Changming Duan

University of Missouri, Kansas City

Dr. Jeremy Hein

University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire

Dr. Samlong Inthaly

Minneapolis Public Schools

Dr. Kevin K. Kumashiro

University of Illinois, Chicago

Dr. Carl L. Bankston III

Tulane University

Dr. George Chigas

University of Massachusetts, Lowell

Dr. Hien Duc Do

San Jose State University

Dr. Sophal Ear

U.S. Naval Postgraduate School

Dr. Nancy H. Hornberger

University of Pennsylvania

Dr. Peter Nien-Chu Kiang

University of Massachusetts, Boston

Dr. Ha Lam

Arizona State University

Dr. Jonathan H. X. Lee

San Francisco State University

Dr. Sue Needham

California State University, Dominguez Hills

Dr. Max Niedzwiecki

Daylight Consulting Group

Dr. Clara Park

California State University, Northridge

Dr. Mark Pfeifer

SUNY Institute of Technology

Dr. Loan T. Phan

University of New Hampshire

Dr. Karen Quintiliani

California State University, Long Beach

Dr. Angela Reyes

Hunter College, The City University of New York

Dr. Fay Shin

California State University, Long Beach

Dr. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials

University of Connecticut, Storrs

Dr. Yer J. Thao

Portland State University

Dr. Myluong Tran

San Diego State University

Dr. Khatharya Um

University of California, Berkeley

Dr. Terrence G. Wiley

Center for Applied Linguistics

Dr. Stacey Lee

University of Wisconsin, Madison

Dr. Bic Ngo

University of Minnesota

Dr. Leakhena Nou

California State University, Long Beach

Dr. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud

San Francisco State University

Dr. Giang Pham

University of Minnesota

Dr. Bounlieng Phommavanh

Minnesota Department of Education

Dr. Kalyani Rai

University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

Dr. Sovecha Ros

Royal University of Phnom Penh

Dr. Nancy J. Smith-Hefner

Boston University

Dr. Christine Su

Ohio University

Dr. Loan Tran

University of California, Riverside

Dr. Tinou Tran

Alief Independent School District

Dr. Linda Trinh Vo

University of California, Irvine

Dr. Zha Blong Xiong

University of Minnesota

Dr. Kou Yang

California State University, Stanislaus

Doctoral Student Editorial Review Board

Virak Chan

University of Texas, San Antonio

Annie BichLoan Duong

San Joaquin County Office of Education

Peter Tan Keo

Columbia University

Monirith Ly

Texas State University-San Marcos

Hoa Nha Nguyen

Boston College

Vanna Som

Harvard University

Krissyvan Truong

Claremont Graduate University

Yang Sao Xiong

University of California, Los Angeles

Keo Chea-Young

University of Pennsylvania

Ketmani Kouanchao

California State University, Fullerton

Ravy Lao

University of California, Santa Barbara

Thien-Huong Ninh

University of Southern California

Malaphone Phommasa

University of California, Santa Barbara

Alisia Tran

University of Minnesota

Silvy Un

University of Minnesota

Yeng Yang

University of Texas, San Antonio